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EARLY SNOW

A Nō Play

Evening Mist, a servant girl.

A lady, the Abbot's daughter.

Two noble ladies.

The soul of the bird Hatsuyuki ("Early Snow").

Chorus.

Scene, the Great Temple at Izumo.

Servant. I am a servant at the Nyoroku Shrine in the Great Temple of Izumo. My name is Evening Mist. You must know that the Lord Abbot has a daughter, a beautiful lady and gentle as can be. And she keeps a tame bird that was given her a year ago, and because it was a lovely white bird, she called it Hatsuyuki, Early Snow; and she loves it dearly.

I have not seen the bird to-day. I think I will go to the bird-cage and have a look at it. [*She goes to the cage.*] Mercy on us, the bird is not there! Whatever shall I say to my lady? But I shall have to tell her. I think I'll tell her now. Madam, madam, your dear Snow-bird is not here!

Lady. What is that you say? Early Snow is not there? It cannot be true. [*She goes to the cage.*] It is true. Early Snow has gone! How can that be? How can it be that my pretty one that was so tame should vanish and leave no trace?

Oh, bitterness of snows

POETRY: *A Magazine of Verse*

That melt and disappear!
Now do I understand
The meaning of a midnight dream
That lately broke my rest.
A harbinger it was
Of Hatsuyuki's fate. [She bursts into tears.]

Chorus:

Though for such tears and sighs
There be no cause,
Yet came her grief so suddenly,
Her heart's fire is ablaze;
And all the while
Never a moment are her long sleeves dry.
They say that written letters first were traced
By feet of birds in sand.
Yet Hatsuyuki leaves no testament. [They mourn.]

Chorus ["Kuse" chant, irregular verse accompanied by dancing]:

How sad to call to mind
When first it left the breeding-cage,
So fair of form
And colored white as snow.
We called it Hatsuyuki, Year's First Snow.
And where our mistress walked
It followed like the shadow at her side.
But now—alas!—it is a bird of parting,
Though not in Love's dark lane.

Arthur Waley

Lady. There's no help now. [*She weeps bitterly.*]

Chorus:

Still there is one way left. Stop weeping, lady,
And turn your heart to him who vowed to hear.
The Lord Amida, if a prayer be said—
Who knows but he can bring
Even a bird's soul into Paradise
And set it on the Lotus Pedestal?

Lady. Evening Mist, are you not sad that Hatsuyuki has gone? But we must not cry any more. Let us call together the noble ladies of this place and for seven days sit with them praying behind barred doors. Go now and do my bidding.

[*Evening Mist fetches the noble ladies of the place.*]

Two Noble Ladies [together]:

A solemn mass we sing,
A dirge for the dead;
At this hour of heart-cleansing
We beat on Buddha's gong.

[*They pray.*]

Namu Amida Butsu,
Namu Nyorai.
Praise to Amida Buddha,
Praise to Mida our Saviour!

[*The prayers and gong-beating last for some time and form the central ballet of the play.*]

POETRY: *A Magazine of Verse*

[*The bird's soul appears as a white speck in the sky.*]

Chorus:

Look! Look! A cloud in the clear mid-sky!
But it is not a cloud.
With pure white wings beating the air
The Snow-bird comes!
Flying towards our lady,
Lovingly he hovers,
Dances before her.

The Bird's Soul. Drawn by the merit of your prayers
and songs

Chorus: .

Straightway he was reborn in Paradise.
By the pond of Eight Virtues he walks abroad:
With the Phoenix and Fugan his playtime passing.
He lodges in the sevenfold summit of the trees of Heaven.
No hurt shall harm him
Forever and ever.

.
Now like the tasselled doves we loose
From battlements on holy days,
A little while he flutters;
Flutters a little while and then is gone
We know not where.

Komparu Zembo Motoyazu (1453-1532)
Translated from the Japanese by Arthur Waley